

American Foursquare (1900-1930)



Historical Origins



American Foursquare Kit Home from the Sears, Roebuck & Co. Mail-Order Catalog

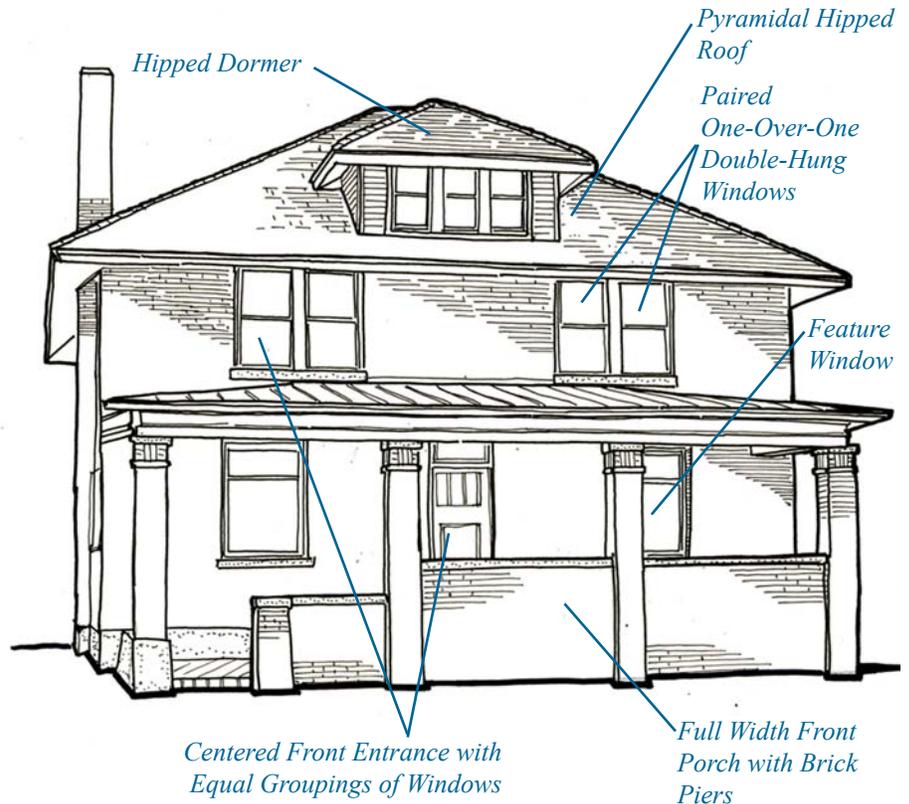
The American Foursquare began appearing on American streets—from Seattle to San Diego, Miami to New York, and here in Roanoke—around the turn of the twentieth century. This new style promised affordable, utilitarian housing for middle-class families trying to gain the most from a modest lot. Simplistic and practical, American Foursquares are one of the most common housing types found in Roanoke’s diverse neighborhoods.

The American Foursquare’s origins are rooted in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect who shunned asymmetrical late-Victorian era pretension and pioneered a humbler, boxier, more down-to-earth alternative for domestic architecture.

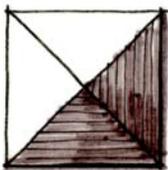
Pattern books and mail-order catalog companies such as Sears, Roebuck & Co., and Aladdin Houses helped promote Wright’s new “Prairie” vision by offering kit homes that included American Foursquare house plans. The pieces were trucked or shipped by boxcar to cities across the country, which helps explain why American Foursquares were built in neighborhoods near rail lines.

Essential Elements

- Cubical-shaped, two-story house, square in plan and elevation.
- **Hipped** or pyramidal hipped roof with hipped, **gabled** or **pedimented** dormers on one or more sides of main roof.
- Deep, full-width or wrap around porch, one story in height, with significant structural components.
- Centered front entrance with equal groupings of windows on either side of both stories; or off-centered entrance with symmetrical upper story window arrangement.
- Craftsman or Colonial Revival influence present on doors, windows, porches, and *eaves*.



Massing & Roof Forms



Pyramidal



Hipped

The American Foursquare is characterized more by its simple box-like form and low-**hipped** roof, than its style, thus gaining its name from a straightforward floor plan of four rooms on each level. The standard American Foursquare truly is square in form often measuring 28' x 28', 29' x 29', or 30' x 30'. The roof is either hipped or pyramidal hipped with a hipped, **gabled** or **pedimented** dormer on one or more sides with a **pitch** ranging from 6:12 to 8:12. The roof is typically accented with a wide *eave*.

The American Foursquare is always two stories tall. Window and door composition on the front façade typically consists of two windows (sometimes paired) and a centered or off-centered door on the first floor, two windows (sometimes paired) on the second floor and a centered dormer in the roof. The American Foursquare typically has an exterior end chimney projecting through the eaves.



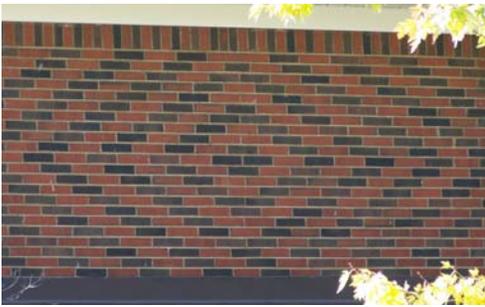
Gabled Dormer



Hipped Dormer with Exposed Rafters



Wall Cladding



Diapering with Soldier Course Above



Combination of Brick and Shingle Siding

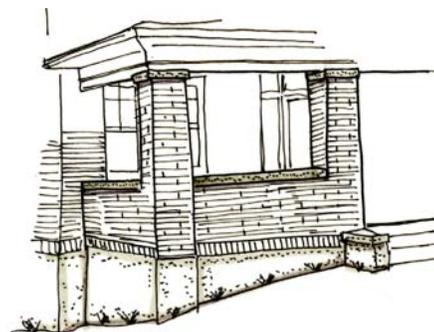
Walls were almost always laid in brick. Occasionally, decorative geometric patterns called *diapering* were used with darker brick highlighting the pattern. Many American Foursquares feature a horizontal band of vertical bricks (a *soldier course*) at the roof wall junction. Wood siding (4 to 6 inch exposure), wood shingles and stucco were often used to accent the second story and dormer windows.

Porches

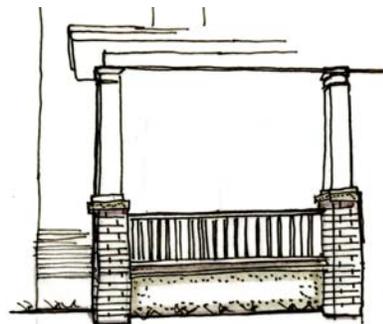


A full-length, one-story front porch is a widespread element of the American Foursquare. The porch often extends to one side as either a wrap around porch or as a *porte-cochere* for parking vehicles. American Foursquare porches are typically accessed by concrete steps that match the foundation with flanking square brick posts.

Because most American Foursquares are brick, most porch supports are 12 inch square brick posts of full height. Brick knee-walls capped with concrete *coping* usually span between the brick posts. Other variations will feature a brick pier with tapered wood posts (10 to 12 inches wide) and wood railings with 2 inch square *balusters*.



Brick Piers with Knee-Wall Capped with Concrete Coping



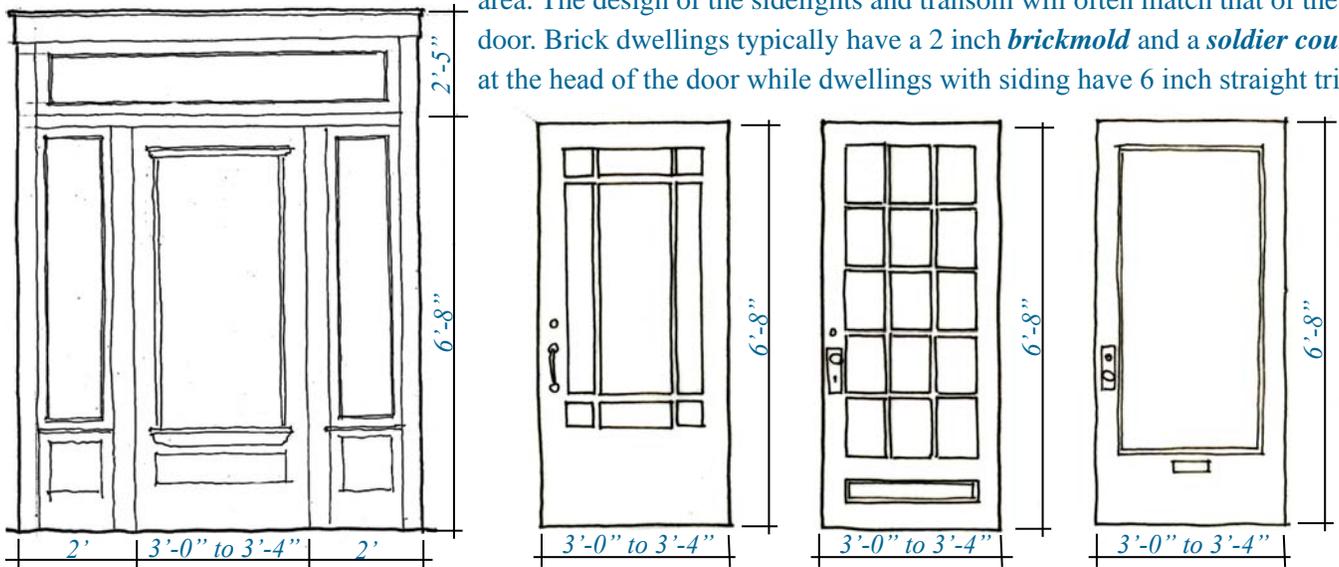
Tapered Post on Brick Pedestal with Wood Railings



Brick Piers with Wood Railings

Doors

The American Foursquare door is similar to other front doors of the 1920s with rectangular-shaped glass and raised wood panels. *Sidelights* and a *transom* often accent the front door while allowing more light into the living area. The design of the sidelights and transom will often match that of the door. Brick dwellings typically have a 2 inch *brickmold* and a *soldier course* at the head of the door while dwellings with siding have 6 inch straight trim.

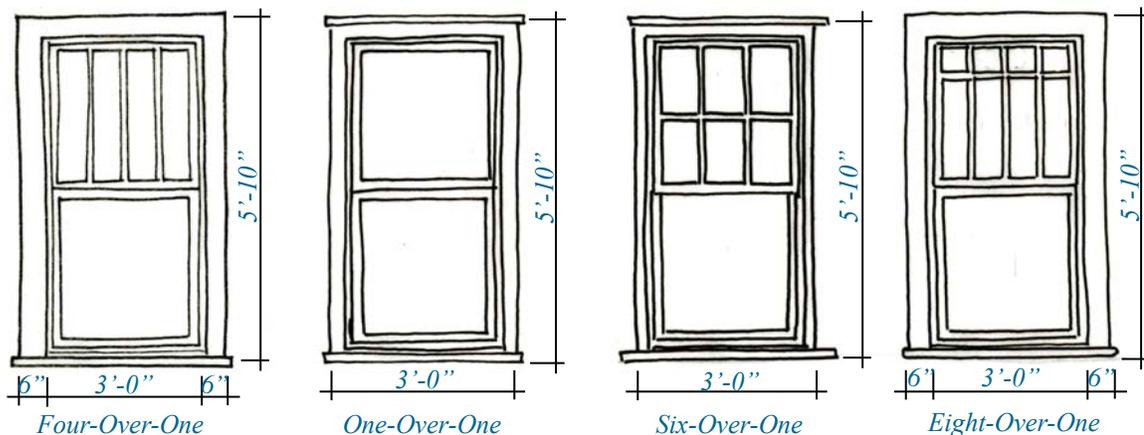


Typical Doors found on the American Foursquare

Windows

Paired, *double-hung* wood windows with four-over-one *sashes* typify the American Foursquare. Other common window sash types include a one-over-one or a six-over-one double-hung window. Sometimes decorative six or eight-over-one windows were used. Brick dwellings typically have a 2 inch *brickmold* and a *soldier course* at the head of the window while dwellings with siding have 6 inch straight trim. Shutters were rarely used on the American Foursquare.

Window placement reflects the American Foursquare floor plan. For example, sets of double or triple windows, and in some instances a *bay* window, on a side elevation will denote the first floor living room/dining room or a second floor master bedroom. A small window between floors will light the staircase, while a small second floor window located between larger windows indicates a bathroom or closet.



Stylistic Influences

The modest American Foursquare design lent itself to changing architectural tastes effortlessly and inexpensively. Thus an American Foursquare in Roanoke is often decorated with stylistic features from either the Colonial Revival or the Craftsman styles:



Colonial Revival Influence

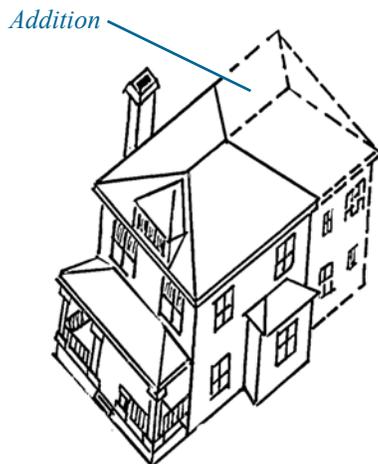
- **Pedimented gable** over a porch entry.
- Classical **columns**
- **Cornice** with **dentils** or **modillions**.
- Dormer with a **Palladian**-style window.



Craftsman Influence

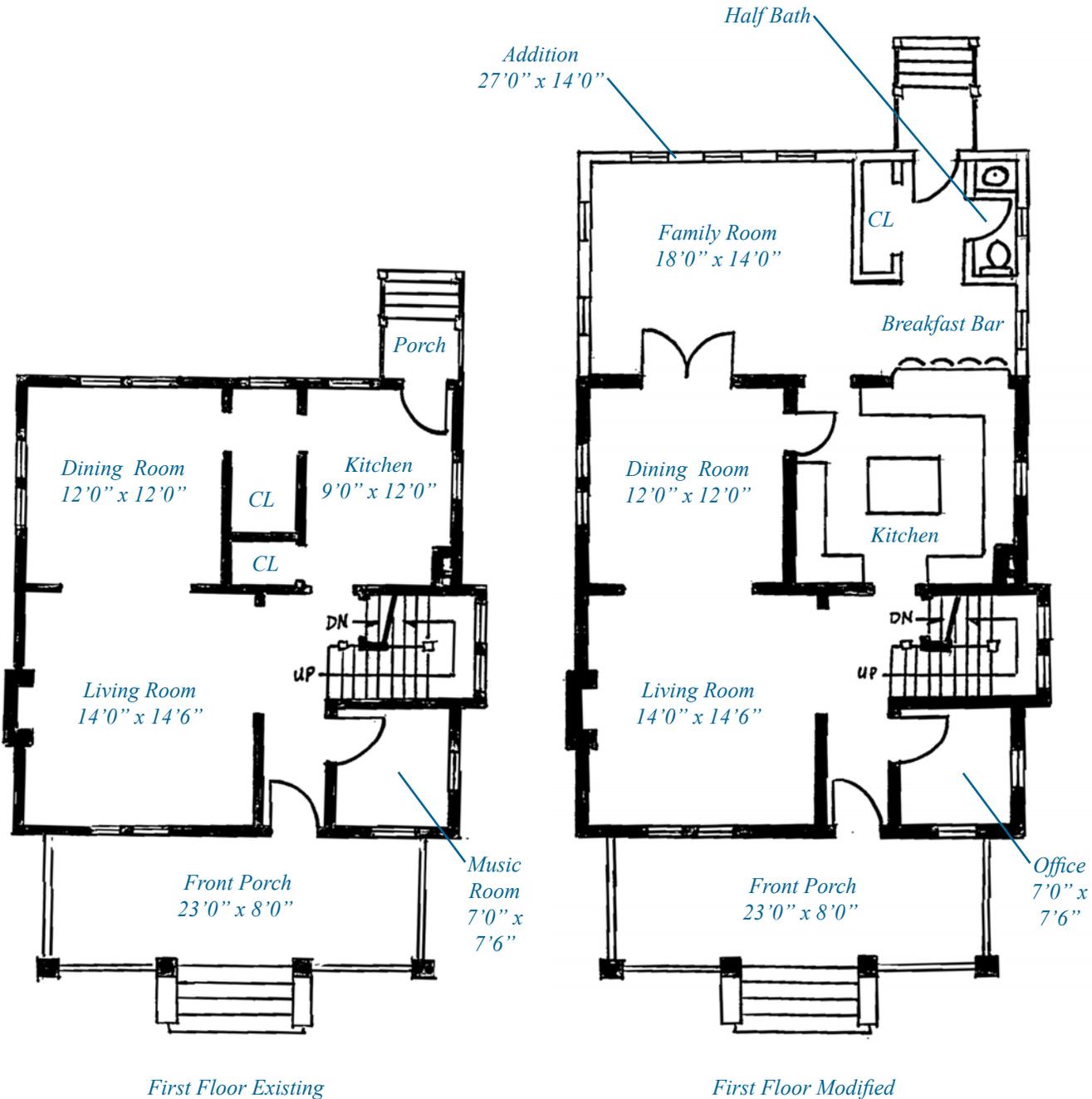
- Low-**pitched** roof
- Tapered posts
- Wide **eaves** with exposed **rafter tails** or **knee braces**.
- Large **gabled** or shed dormers with exposed **rafter tails** and braces.

Additions

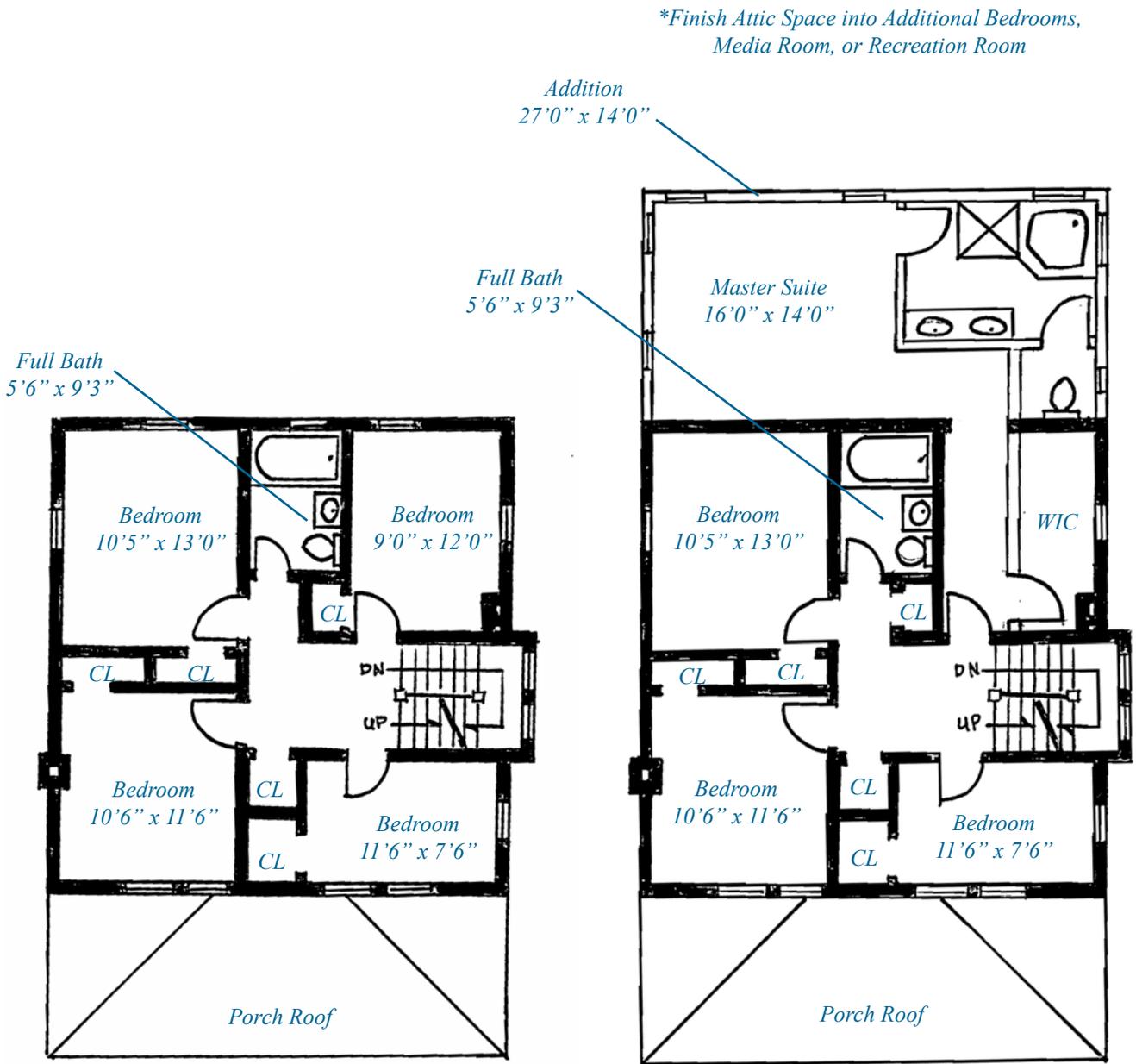


New additions to American Foursquares should be designed as secondary elements or wings that are compatible with the overall **massing** and scale of the original house. An addition should never be larger or wider than the main residence. The most appropriate location for an addition is to the rear of the property to minimize visibility from the street. Additions should be designed and built so that the form and character of the primary residence will remain intact if the addition is ever removed.

An addition should respect the stylistic influences that may be found on an American Foursquare. Similar exterior finish materials should be used whenever possible. A list of appropriate materials specific to the American Foursquare is provided at the end of this section. Roofing forms and materials should match those of the original structure if possible, with low-**pitch** roofs that are subordinate to the primary roof line. Windows should be similar to the original in type and style, employing wooden **double-hung sash** or **casement** windows as necessary. More information on additions can be found within the New Construction section of this document.



Reallocation of Existing Square Footage and Addition to an American Foursquare



Second Floor Existing

Second Floor Modified

Reallocation of Existing Square Footage and Addition to an American Foursquare

Garages and Porte-Cocheres



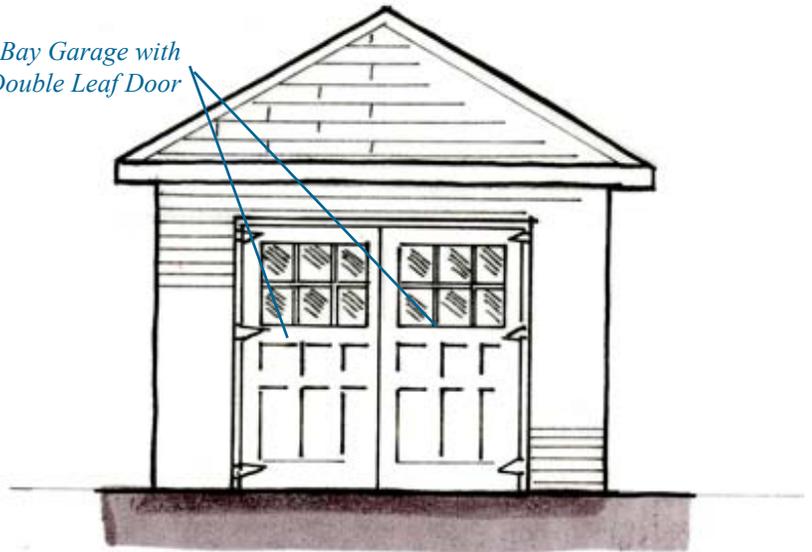
Two Bay Garage with Sliding Doors



Porte-Cochere Accessed by Double Strips of Concrete

Like other early 20th-Century residences, American Foursquare houses had matching garages; most garages were one *bay* wide, while some featured two bays divided by a centered brick post (as opposed to one wide door that is common today). The garages were often brick that matched the house with double-leaf doors or sliding doors. The roof *pitch* is usually lower than the main house. The garages were located off the rear corner of the house at the end of double strips of concrete. Vehicles were also parked under a *porte-cochere*.

One Bay Garage with Double Leaf Door



Painting an American Foursquare

Soft colors such as white or ivory should be used on the American Foursquare's wood *sashes*, *eaves*, and trim. Soft earth tones such as brown, yellow, and green should be used on siding and shingles. Unpainted brick should never be painted as it could drastically alter the home's original character and trap moisture inside walls.

Maintaining Character Defining Features



Roanoke's stock of American Foursquares is nearly one hundred years old. This longevity attests to the sturdiness of construction and craftsmanship that made these houses an American tradition. Despite their durability, homeowners should take a few simple maintenance steps to preserve the character-defining elements that add richness to local American Foursquares.

The symmetrical *massing* for which the American Foursquare is named is one of the most important architectural features to maintain. A simple insensitive window replacement can impact the house by skewing its façade proportions. Because exterior architectural elements are character-defining features of an American Foursquare, their ongoing maintenance is essential to preserving the historic significance of a building.

Doors and windows are among the most highly visible features of any residence. All windows should be maintained and repaired annually. Windows located beneath the full-width porches are always protected from the sun and

rain and rarely require replacement. Porches and *porte-cocheres* are fundamental aspects of an American Foursquare and should be maintained and repaired annually. Front porches should never be enclosed with siding, nor should they be removed or altered. Unpainted brick should never be painted.

Appropriate Materials



- *Roofs:* Fiberglass shingles (architectural grade), cementitious shingles, slate and faux slate materials, and pressed metal shingles.
- *Wall Cladding:* Smooth finish brick. Wood or smooth finished fiber-cement boards in *novelty* siding and lap siding with a 4 inch to 6 inch lap exposure where appropriate on wood clad houses.
- *Porch Ceilings:* Tongue-and-groove wood or composite boards, or beaded-profile plywood.
- *Columns and Posts:* Solid brick posts or brick piers with tapered square posts. Architecturally correct proportions and details in wood, fiberglass, or composite material; as appropriate to the porch type.
- *Railings:* Milled wood top and bottom rails with thick square *balusters* (2" x 2" nominal dimension).
- *Doors:* Wood, fiberglass or steel with traditional stile-and-rail proportions, raised panel profiles, and *glazing* proportions.
- *Windows:* Wood, or aluminum-clad wood. Vinyl clad windows (generally not allowed in the H-1 or H-2 Historic Districts) should only be used in conjunction with brick veneer. True divided light or *simulated divided light* (SDL) *sash* with traditional exterior *muntin* profile (7/8 inch wide).
- *Shutters:* Shutters were not typically used on the American Foursquare and should not be added embellish the exterior.
- *Trim:* Wood, composite, or polyurethane millwork.



Gallery of Examples

